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Intelligence Memorandum

Trends in Military Imports to North Vietnam

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TCS No. 3237/73
8 March 1973

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
March 1973

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

TRENDS IN MILITARY IMPORTS TO NORTH VIETNAM

CONCLUSIONS

1. Current restrictions on overflights of North Vietnam preclude the collection of direct evidence of the extent of military deliveries to North Vietnam from either of its traditional suppliers – the USSR or the People's Republic of China. This fact notwithstanding, it is possible to develop a strong case that such resupply activity is presently under way, and at a pace which permits Hanoi to retain a considerable degree of flexibility in its policy decisions regarding peace or war. Furthermore, the current level of military imports does not appear to be greatly below that of the six or so months immediately preceding the cease-fire, a period of time during which we believe record amounts of military hardware poured into North Vietnam.

2. It is likely that the current pace of military imports will slacken in the months ahead, barring a resumption of heavy military activity. The need for air defense materiel has, of course, been drastically reduced, and, once stocks are rebuilt, further imports of these expensive items presumably will cease. Also as stockpiles in Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam are built back up to desired levels the presently heavy flows of supplies into these areas should taper off.

3. These judgments must be viewed as estimates of the situation rather than firm fact, based, as they are, on very fragmentary evidence, given the proscription of one of our major sources of information – aerial reconnaissance over North Vietnam. However, the judgments are made in the context of a continuing and intensive study of North Vietnam's import

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activities over the course of the war since 1965, and thus we feel confident in assigning them a high order of probability.

DISCUSSION

Source Limitations

4. Over the years, there has been little direct evidence of foreign military aid deliveries to North Vietnam, which are made almost entirely by overland transport. Except for occasional solid evidence received in COMINT [REDACTED] military aid estimates have been based primarily on indirect evidence from a variety of sources. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] has traditionally provided fairly reliable evidence of increments to inventories of these large items. However, determination of imports of small arms and ammunition could be made only on the basis of observed use of such ordnance in actual combat plus estimates of losses from Allied air and ground actions and estimated expenditures for training in rear base areas.

5. Since the cease-fire, our estimating problem has been even further compounded by the suspension of aerial reconnaissance over North Vietnam. The Sino-Soviet transshipment points and the key entry gate along the Chinese-North Vietnamese border -- the P'ing-hsiang/Dong Dang complex -- have not been photographed since late January. [REDACTED]

The Pattern of Military Imports

6. Prior to 1972, the peak of military aid to North Vietnam was reached in 1967 with the import of large quantities of small arms and ammunition (principally from China) and SAMs and antiaircraft artillery (from the USSR). The level of military aid tailed off through the subsequent three years but began to move up again in 1971, as shown in the following tabulation:

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	<i>Thousand Metric Tons</i>				
	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971
Total	125	85	50	35	45
Monthly average	10	7	4	3	4

7. By applying the same methodology used to derive this data series - that is, by combining information on observed shipments and known expenditure rates on the battlefields and in air defense - the level of military imports for 1972 appears to be about 70,000 tons, or 6,000 tons per month. However, there is convincing evidence that the actual level of imports, particularly in the past six months or so prior to the cease-fire, may have been as much as double that average monthly figure. This evidence is three-fold: COMINT indications of large volumes of military shipments through rear base areas in North Vietnam in support of the 1972 offensive; large expenditures of SAM and antiaircraft artillery ammunition from April through December; and numerous sightings of military weapons moving into North Vietnam across the Chinese border.

8. During the period October 1972 through January 1973, COMINT revealed that some 50,000 tons of military supplies moved through the North Vietnam Panhandle toward front lines in northern and southern Laos and South Vietnam. Of this total, more than half comprised ordnance, including both small arms and heavy weapons ammunition. Ammunition in these shipments included large quantities for 122-mm and 130-mm field guns; for antiaircraft artillery of all sizes; and for mortars, rockets, and all types of small arms. Weapons, in addition to the normal complement of individual and crew-served varieties, included nearly 200 detected field artillery weapons, mostly 122-mm and 130-mm pieces. On a tonnage-per-month basis, this level of activity represented nearly 7,500 tons of ordnance. In addition, in North Vietnam itself, more than 3,600 SA-2 missiles (with a gross weight of 9,500 tons) were fired during the bombing, along with large quantities of antiaircraft artillery ammunition. In addition, substantial numbers of associated launchers, radar vans, and transporters were destroyed.

9. It is, of course, impossible to say what part of this war materiel was imported during 1972, but [REDACTED] strong evidence that much of this materiel or replacement components for it arrived after the mining. In the period from May 1972 through January 1973, armored tanks were observed in [REDACTED] the P'ing-hsiang railyard and across the border at Dong Dang railyard in North Vietnam. [REDACTED]

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10. All things taken together, we estimate that during the last half of 1972 - and possibly through January 1973 - the Communists maintained one of the highest average monthly rates of military imports of the war.

Military Imports Since the Cease-Fire

11. Direct hard evidence of military shipments into North Vietnam since the cease-fire is virtually nonexistent. This limitation notwithstanding,

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we can make some judgments on military imports since the cease-fire and what the prospects are for the near term. This is made possible by combining available current information on trends in the Communist resupply effort in Laos, South Vietnam, and North Vietnam with certain facts about Hanoi's traditional attitude toward military logistics and stockpiling. Throughout the war, the North Vietnamese have practiced a very conservative materiel policy -- for every type of ordnance or military equipment provided to front line forces, they have maintained very large stockpiles in rear base areas. Thus, we feel confident in the judgment that, as supplies are continuing to be moved out of North Vietnam into base areas in Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam, the large stockpiles in North Vietnam are being maintained.

12. There is impressive evidence that a high pace of logistic activity is continuing. A recent COMINT intercept, for example, revealed that some 6,600 tons of military supplies -- mostly arms and ammunition -- were moved through the central Panhandle of North Vietnam to the battlefield in northern Laos during the first three weeks of February. Military supplies are also continuing to move toward southern Indochina.

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13. The high level of logistic activity has surged deeper into the Laotian Panhandle network. During February the flow of supplies through the entry corridors into Laos peaked, reaching heights at least equal to that of the same period in both 1971 and 1972, when the Communists were rushing supplies south to support their opposition to Operation Lam Son 719 and when they were preparing for their 1972 Spring Offensive. Within the Laotian Panhandle, supplies currently are moving in all directions toward all of South Vietnam's major battle zones. Hundreds of trucks are on the move carrying all types of supplies, including ordnance. Currently, large numbers of armored vehicles and artillery pieces are en route through Laos to Cambodia and South Vietnam.

14. There have been no indications in the post-cease-fire period that the Communists have felt it necessary to conserve supplies while rebuilding their military capability in South Vietnam. Relatively heavy firing from 130-mm guns and other weapons, including the new Soviet SA-7 Strela anti-aircraft missile and the Soviet AT-3 Sagger wire-guided antitank missile, continue, and some new SA-2 sites have recently been established near Khe Sanh.* The continued pattern of such activity indicates that ordnance and

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military equipment are not in short supply, and there have been no signs that Communist forces deployed in Laos or South Vietnam are expecting any reduction of supplies in the near term. On the contrary, a late February report from COSVN - Hanoi's military command for southern South Vietnam - stated that military forces are to "continue to be supplied, reinforced, and developed as they were before the cease-fire." In order to pursue this course, military forces were told to maintain sizable stockpiles of military supplies.

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15. Indeed, there have been several indications that preparations for future logistic activity are under way. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] a newly constructed segment of petroleum pipeline leading from Laos toward the A Shau Valley. When completed, this pipeline will appreciably upgrade the Communist's logistic capability in that area. In addition, by late February, [REDACTED] new Communist construction of a 70-mile-long road which, when completed, will provide a motorable link from southern Laos to the coastal regions of southern Military Region 1 in South Vietnam, enhancing enemy capabilities there.

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16. This, then, is indirect but convincing evidence that Hanoi's logisticians have continued a "business-as-usual" attitude since the cease-fire. The direct evidence - that is, specific indication of military imports into North Vietnam - is very sparse, but supports a judgment that Hanoi, at this point at least, has no immediate concern about the foreign sources of its military supplies.

17. Since the cease-fire, both the USSR and China reaffirmed their intention to continue sending aid, presumably including military aid under the terms of agreements signed with North Vietnam late last year. Extremely fragmentary evidence from COMINT suggests that these aid commitments are being carried out. Thus far in 1973, about 900 trucks have been detected in COMINT arriving in North Vietnam via rail from the USSR and China, as shown in the following tabulation (this rate is somewhat above that detected in 1972):

	<i>Number of Trucks</i>		
	<i>USSR</i>	<i>China</i>	<i>Total</i>
Total 1973	279	613	892
January	0	181	181
February	279	432	711

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18. While some of these trucks may be destined for the civilian economy, there is little doubt that many of them are going to military units. A majority of North Vietnam's estimated 23,000-28,000 trucks are devoted to moving military supplies, and the fact that military logistic activity is continuing at a high level clearly supports this judgment. COMINT also has provided evidence of continued deliveries of other types of supplies for military purposes.

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Outlook

19. At present, nothing in North Vietnam's current pattern of behavior suggests any sense of concern in Hanoi about the availability of military imports from China and/or the USSR, certainly not the kind of concern that could of itself constrain North Vietnamese choices with respect to the level of military activity chosen to further Hanoi's political objectives.

20. In any case, whether or not North Vietnam and its allies intend to abide by the spirit of the cease-fire and curtail military imports, it seems likely that there will be a slackening off of such imports in the months ahead. For one thing, with the halt in US air operations over North Vietnam, Hanoi's requirement for antiaircraft artillery ammunition, SA-2 missiles, and other types of air defense equipment has fallen to only a fraction of its previous level. These are the most bulky and expensive items in Hanoi's military aid bill and the most easily detected. It is also likely that, as the rainy season approaches and ammunition and weapons caches are built up to desired levels in Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam, the movement of supplies into these areas will decline. Even if Hanoi's allies are willing to sponsor the buildup and maintenance of relatively large weapons inventories, such imports in the future - assuming no large-scale resumption of hostilities - might not exceed 3,000-4,000 tons a month - about the level of the 1969-71 period.